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# GENERAL PETRAEUS: Bringing Myth Back To The Military



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General David H. Petraeus, the commander of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, is already a legend in the U.S. Army. The four-star general - best known for orchestrating the “surge” in Iraq - has revolutionized the way the U.S. fights its wars.

How did one man usher in a cultural and doctrinal sea change inside a notoriously intransigent bureaucratic behemoth like the U.S. Army?

*By leading from the front.*



Petraeus has always placed himself at the forefront. The son of a Dutch sea captain, Petraeus grew up in Cornwall-on-Hudson, just a few miles away from the U.S. Military Academy. At West Point, he was known as a “Star Boy,” graduating in the top 5% of his class in 1974. He went on to graduate with honors from Ranger school in 1975, and was the top graduate in the Army Command and General Staff College class of 1983. “David Petraeus,” Gen. Hugh Shelton, the former Joint Chiefs of Staff and Petraeus’ former mentor, told a profiler in 2005, “is a high-energy individual who likes to lead from the front, in any field he is going into.”

As Petraeus’ military career began its ascent, legends formed around the young commander. One oft-repeated tale recounts Petraeus’ brush with death in 1991, when he was accidentally shot in the chest during training exercises at Fort Campbell, Ky. After a five-hour surgery, hospital commanders tried to keep him in the hospital; Petraeus pulled the tubes out of his

arm, did 50 push-ups and they let him walk out the door. Another - miraculously true - story tells how Petraeus used the 101st Battalion battle cry to wake a lieutenant from what was thought to be an irreversible coma.

The legends are a testament to Petraeus' natural leadership talents. He has mastered what he expects of others. In other words, he leads from the front.

Colonel Mike Meese, Petraeus' assistant chief of staff in Afghanistan points out that Petraeus' leadership as a strategic thinker stems from his vision of the army as a flexible, intelligent, essentially human institution. This radical idea - which encourages initiative and independence and emphasizes intellectual, as well as physical, strength - has changed the way the army thinks and altered the way the world's most powerful army goes to war in the 21st century.

"I think General Petraeus, along with many other senior leaders, have reinforced with the Army what we fundamentally have always known: that war is ultimately a human endeavor that is fraught with "fog and friction," and that it ultimately takes smart, adaptive leaders on the ground to successfully accomplish national security goals," Meese said in an email to Business Insider. "Our high technology and sophisticated weaponry are very helpful, but it is understanding circumstances, like counterinsurgency, and being able to lead soldiers that makes the ultimate difference for the Nation."

The seeds of Petraeus' vision were planted at Princeton University, where he earned a Ph.D. in international relations from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. His 1987 [doctoral dissertation](#), *The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam*, challenged the prevailing view that the Vietnam War had failed because politicians and public opinion had abandoned the effort.

Petraeus concluded that the failure in Vietnam was actually due to a flawed strategy that failed to fully understand the enemy or account for the society it was fighting in and the government it was supporting. The U.S. Army lacked a strategy for fighting a war where humans were the key terrain.

This vision of a counterinsurgency strategy for fighting modern wars continued to take shape during Petraeus' subsequent tours in Haiti and Bosnia. But it did not fully take hold until Petraeus saw combat for the first time, as commander of the famed 101st Airborne Division during the drive to Baghdad.

After the fall of Baghdad, Petraeus famously asked *Washington Post* reporter Rick Atkinson to "Tell me how this ends." The 101st Battalion spent the next 10 months in Mosul, restarting the city's economy, developing infrastructure and institutions, building up a local security force, and, most importantly for Petraeus, winning over Iraqi hearts and minds.

"At my level, in the first year and very early on, a huge decision was to say, 'We are going to do nation building.' I know that we as a country didn't think the military should get into nation building and all this," [Petraeus told GQ](#) in 2008. "But very early on, we decided in the

101st that we're gonna do it. We're gonna run an election. We need Iraqi partners. We need help carrying this heavy rucksack. And oh, by the way, they know a lot more about how their country is supposed to work than we do. We went from being, you know, warriors to builders. From soldiers to statesmen, I guess."

His strategy for stamping out insurgency and encouraging stability met with surprising success. After just over two years in Iraq, Petraeus had overseen the reconstruction of Mosul and built an Iraqi security force from scratch.

"He had a vision," Sergeant Major Marvin Hill, one of Petraeus' closest colleagues told *GQ*. "He knew when he got to Iraq he had to live among the people - that was his genius....You can't shoot your way out, you can't kill your way out, of an insurgency. You just can't. You have to find other kinds of ammunition, and it's not always a bullet."

In late 2005, Petraeus returned to the U.S., and assembled the army's best thinkers to turn his vision into practice. The [Counterinsurgency manual](#) - now more commonly known as the Petraeus Doctrine - is the first army doctrine to actively focus on the human element of war. It espouses the radical idea that political and economic development are key strategic elements of modern war and that civilian security and well-being are critical to success.

"What [we're] dealing with is much more complex and much more nuanced than what we were trained to do when I was a captain," Petraeus told *Newsweek* in 2008. "You have to understand not just what we call the military terrain ... the high ground and low ground. It's about understanding the human terrain, really understanding it."

Petraeus vision of 21st century warfare was not without its critics. Counterinsurgency, or COIN, met resistance among higher-ranking generals, including those Petraeus went on to replace as commander of U.S. forces in Iraq. Although COIN proved largely successful during the 2007 surge, the Democratic Congress wasn't in the mood to hear things were working. The general stuck by his vision, however, knowing that, in the end, a flexible army would yield results.

Perhaps the most significant challenge to Petraeus' vision has been the war in Afghanistan. Petraeus, as commander of CENTCOM, was the leading voice on COIN in Afghanistan, even before McChrystal and his staff were quoted disparaging the doctrine (and the White House) in the infamous [Rolling Stone article](#) that got McChrystal fired. Last summer, Petraeus was called in to take control of the situation in Afghanistan. It was a demotion, but he was the only man for the job.

The truth was COIN wasn't working in Afghanistan. The Taliban had proven much more resistant to COIN tactics than Iraq's insurgents. By most accounts, Petraeus has grasped that Afghanistan is not Iraq. The general is, once again, leading from the front. Since taking command, he has overseen a different type of strategy, which integrates counter-terrorism efforts more fully into the counterinsurgency campaign.

In a sense, it has been a true test of Petraeus' leadership. At its core, his vision acknowledges

that war is ambiguous, and emphasizes adaptability and creativity in the face of that ambiguity:

"The truth is not found in any one school of thought, and arguably it's found in discussion among them," Petraeus said in 2005. "This is a flexibility of mind that really helps you when you are in ambiguous, tough situations."

When President Barack Obama [announced last month](#) that Petraeus would be leaving Afghanistan to take over as head of the Central Intelligence Agency this summer, pundits and experts questioned whether it was a sign that the general's strategy had failed in Afghanistan, or a political ploy to remove a potential Obama rival.

In reality, Petraeus was, once again, the only man for the job. His new role is the natural next step in executing his vision of transforming the bulky American military-intelligence bureaucracy into the world's most powerful and dynamic security force, capable of taking on the mutable threats of the 21st century. The CIA lives at the front of the threats. Now, they'll have a leader who likes living there as well.

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